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In Malaysia: UMNO must sharpen its wits, not its elbows

Kee Beng



As the dust settles after Malaysia's astonishing March 8 election results, the people to keep a close eye on are the leadership in all the parties. How these decide to play the game under the new political conditions will have a direct effect on the well-being of the country in the immediate and distant future.

The matter is simpler where the opposition parties are concerned. Whether or not the federal government chooses to undermine the state governments run by the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), these have little choice but to appear to provide as clean and rational an administration as they can manage. Their eyes are on winning the next general elections and embedding themselves into positions of power for good.

Although disagreements are bound to appear along the way, staying on the high level of political relevance to which they were catapulted through their new-found ability to cooperate with each other will encourage them to tolerate each other and work out their differences without hurting their joint standing with the electorate.

Things are different where the member parties of the long-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) are concerned. For big losers such as Parti Gerakan Rakyat, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) or the People's Progressive Party (PPP), the only choice now is reinvention.

To remain relevant, a change in personnel will not suffice. This is because the very rationale for their existence is now in question.

In the case of the MCA and the MIC, their time of glory depended on the efficacy of the consociational model whereby member parties represented an ethnic community, and together, the coalition represented the whole country.

The Gerakan and the PPP started out in the opposition, but joined the expanded coalition in 1974. Their sad standing with the electorate today depends largely on them successively losing their reputation as critical voices within the BN.

Given voters' progress away from ethnicity-based politics, these parties have to use their wits, take a leap of faith, reduce race consciousness in their arguments, and come up with an agenda that is inclusive rather than exclusive.

And then we have the case of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Having been dominant for so long, its members are finding it hard to do without the racial card. Although it still calls the shots in many ways, splits between its leaders have become so obvious that it cannot speak with anything like a single masterful voice.

Thus, the rationale of BN's existence is also in question. The fear spread for so long by UMNO and its allies that a voter revolt against BN could only lead to racial violence and chaos proved to be unfounded. That in itself may be the most lasting accomplishment of March 8.

Abdullah Badawi is therefore right in thinking that a change in personnel will not help the party and the coalition. The changes have to be more profound and must involve a change in self-image and spin. Even if it does not give up the Malay agenda as such, it must still adopt some paradigm that is inclusive of non-Malays.

The premier recently made a feeble attempt by stating that "Ketuanan Melayu" (Malay supremacy) did not mean domination of other races at all. He proved as unconvincing as his Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein was in claiming that his ceremonial unsheathing of the keris was in any way a symbolic threat to non-Malays. Hishammuddin's recent apology was also heavily criticised for being too little and too late.

Great danger lies in wait if UMNO fails to summon enough ingenuity in remarketing itself. The recent use of dubious sedition charges against major critics like blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, journalist and author

Syed Akbar Ali and DAP MP Karpal Singh does not bode well for the country. The less the party succeeds in reinventing itself, the more it sharpens its elbows.

Now that the Malay vote is split in support of three parties with Malay leaders (PAS, PKR and UMNO), the mere use of racial terms no longer divide the population to UMNO's advantage the way it used to. With the Islamist PAS strengthened by the electorate, religion is no longer as useable a rallying cry for UMNO as it used to be. Charging Karpal Singh for insulting the Sultan of Perak may signal a re-adoption of the sultans as the uniting symbol of Malayness. The race card takes on another shape.

Many within UMNO do agree that a change in personnel will not be enough for the party to revive itself. However, they do see that as the necessary step for the party to take. Former premier Mahathir Mohamed is definitely convinced of this. He has already made his intentions clear by quitting the party. Even UMNO's number three man, its vice-president and Minister of International Trade and Industry, Muhyiddin Yassin, has been making his impatience known to UMNO members.

Perhaps most interestingly, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the eternal voice of dissent within the party, has taken a decided stand against Abdullah. Despite lackluster support from the grassroots so far, he continues to campaign for a thorough democratisation of the party as well as a re-profiling of the party towards multiracialism at the expense of Malay-centrism.

Without doubt, his stand is radical. But such leaps of faith may be what UMNO will need to take, if it is not to retreat into pure power politics.

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